
ROXBURY, SOUTH END

City pitches widening of Melnea Cass Boulevard and new bike lanes, trees

Posted by Patrick Rosso

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By Patrick D. Rosso, Town Correspondent

Major changes could be coming to Melnea Cass Boulevard in Lower Roxbury.

Members of the Boston Transportation Department were recently before the community to pitch a plan that would widen the boulevard and add transit lanes, new bike and walking paths, and more trees.

Part of the Complete Streets model used by the transportation department, the process works to make roads usable and safe for all modes of transit including cyclists, pedestrians, cars, and public transit. The project also follows in the footsteps of the Roxbury Strategic Master Plan and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation's Urban Ring project, which is currently on hold.

Close to 100 residents packed the Boston Water and Sewer headquarters Wednesday night to hear about the plan. Wednesday's meeting was the fifth public meeting held for the project, according to the Boston Transportation Department.

Many were interested in the benefits that could be brought to the street, including more access points, a more urban street feel to the bustling roadway, and dedicated bus lanes. However, many were concerned about the construction the project would bring, even wider and more dangerous intersections, and more gridlock.

The boulevard currently host two travel lanes in each direction, occasional turning lanes, and walking/biking paths.

Patrick Hoey, senior transportation planner for the city, laid out the plan for residents.

The project, with the design paid for by the city and the work paid for by federal and state grants, will revamp the roadway adding wider sidewalks, bike paths, new trees, more on-street parking, and two transit-specific lanes in the center of the roadway. The transit specific lanes would include bus shelters and would be used by a Bus Rapid Transit system, something the MBTA doesn't have, but it is a component of the Urban Ring project. In the meantime transportation officials explained the lanes could be used by emergency vehicles and the busses that currently travel the road.

Overall the project would make the boulevard 108-feet at its widest point. In comparison the

crossing at the Museum of Fine Arts on Huntington Avenue is 126-feet, the transportation officials said.

Although the envelope of the boulevard would have to be increased, no private land would be used for the project. Two-hundred or so of the existing 500 mature trees along the roadway would have to be removed for the project, but the city said it would add 300 trees, with a net gain of 100.

Overall, transportation officials said they believe the project would increase the efficiency of buses that run along the street and increase the use of the boulevard with the new bike lanes and walking paths. The project is also important, because as transportation representatives explained, the amount of construction happening or about to happen in the area.

Currently Dudley Square, just south of Melnea Cass is being transformed and Parcel 9 and Parcel 10, both located within close proximity to the boulevard, are about to be revamped.

There were a mix of opinions from residents Wednesday.

Some liked the expansion of bike and pedestrian access, saying more foot traffic would be good for local businesses and residents. With the expansion of the boulevard the South Bay Harbor Trail and South West Corridor would also be connected and improved as well.

“We have to make sure we have destination on Melnea Cass,” said Esteban Lara, a Roxbury resident. “We want to give people a reason to come to Dudley Square and Melnea Cass.”

“I love your vision of Melnea Cass being a community corridor,” said Dr. Anne Lusk, of the Harvard School of Public Health, a cyclist advocate. “Cycle tracks [or bike lanes] can really foster this ‘community sense’.”

Others though believed an even wider boulevard would just continue to separate the community, increase traffic, and negatively impact residents.

“I don’t see from your plan that this fits into a neighborhood feel,” said Bill Singleton, an area landlord and resident. “We don’t want a drive-thru.”

The group, Friends and Neighbors of Melnea Cass Boulevard, have also voiced opposition to the project. In a letter addressed to BTB and the community, the group said the widening is a “bad idea.”

“The proposed widening of MCB is a bad idea and an affront to a neighborhood that has seen earlier attempts at disruption for the benefit of others,” read the letter. “This will increase the divide between two thriving residential areas and make it significantly less safe to walk, to ride one’s bicycle, and to negotiate crossing - particularly for our children, senior citizens and persons with disabilities.”

The project where it stands is at the pre-25% design point. A design will soon be submitted to MassDOT for review, which will spark a separate community process expected to begin in the summer. After a MassDOT review, the Boston Transportation Department will continue to come back to the community as it works to have a complete design. Another public meeting,

organized by the department, is expected to be held in the next 3-4 months.

A project website has been created by the Boston Transportation Department. It can be found [here](#).

For a copy of the letter drafted by the Friends and Neighbors of Melnea Cass Boulevard, click [here](#).

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